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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001095

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR HERRO MUSTAPHA  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/24/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 TRYING TO BUILD A UNIFIED MESSAGE

REF: A. BEIRUT 1087

[B](#). BEIRUT 1085

[C](#). BEIRUT 510

[D](#). BEIRUT 392

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#). (C) In a July 23 meeting with A/DCM, March 14 Secretary General (SYG) Fares Souaid was pleased to show off his coalition's new office space and signaled optimism about the creation of a common platform as unifying force for March 14 coalition. Souaid argued that while some slight differences of opinion exist among March 14 members, especially the Christians, the problems are manageable. Additionally, he expressed his belief that Hizballah's current political maneuvers towards the government are a ploy to "buy time" and drum up better support for opposition member Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) for the 2009 elections.

[2](#). (C) Souaid said President Sleiman does not want to have any clashes with the opposition members within the government and will continue to remain "positive neutral." Sleiman is watching carefully Europe's overtures to Syria, and believes Sleiman could be strengthened if it appears Syria begins to move away from Iran. Souaid shared concerns about the National Dialogue process, including non-binding agreements and the need to establish timelines. End summary.

NEW SPACE, NEW UNITY

[3](#). (C) March 14 SYG Fares Souaid welcomed A/DCM, Poloff, and Senior LES Political to March 14's new headquarters on July [23](#). March 14 members Eddy Fayek Abillama, Samir Franjieh, and Camille Ziadeh also attended. The new office space is the first time the March 14 bloc has had a central office available to all of its members for use. Souaid expressed his hope that the members would take advantage of the new space by working there, hosting meetings, and interacting with each other. He believes that the office would assist the members of the coalition by giving them space to discuss, debate, and resolve their differences.

[4](#). (C) Souaid was optimistic that March 14 could present a unified platform for the upcoming 2009 elections, admitting

that although the process could be difficult, it was manageable. He said disagreements persist among Christians, between Christians and Muslims, and Sunni and Shi'a members of the coalition. However, March 14 has begun hosting a series of committees and workshops to explore topical issues, such as electoral reform, civil peace, and Hizballah weapons (Ref C). The papers presented during the workshops serve as the starting point for discussion. At the end of the workshops, all of the views and issues raised will be reevaluated and taken into consideration before a final March 14 position is agreed. Souaid expects these final agreements will create March 14's unified platform. Souaid claimed March 14 coalition members had already agreed on electoral reform issues.

#### SKEPTICAL OF HIZBALLAH

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15. (C) Souaid argued that Hizballah's current political maneuvers are just part of a ploy to "buy time." March 14 does not believe that Hizballah's recent, more conciliatory, tone towards the government is genuine. According to Souaid, Hizballah is trying to improve its image in the eyes of Christian voters, in order that the opposition can increase support for Aoun and gain more votes for the opposition in the 2009 elections. The most important thing for Hizballah is to protect its Christian partners, principally Aoun.

#### SLEIMAN'S BALANCING ACT

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16. (C) Souaid assessed that President Sleiman is taking a balanced approach with members of the government. According to Souaid, Sleiman is watching closely recent overtures towards Syria by European nations, particularly France. Souaid believes that if it appears that Syria makes a policy shift and begins moving more towards Europe and "divorcing" Iran, this could strengthen Sleiman's own position within the government. However, for now, Souaid sees Sleiman avoiding clashes with the opposition and taking a "positive neutral" approach. Souaid informed A/DCM that he also sees presidential appointee and Minister of Interior Ziyad Baroud as a "friend" of March 14 (Ref B).

#### CONCERNS ABOUT NATIONAL DIALOGUE

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17. While Souaid did not offer much comment about the prospects for the timing of the release of the ministerial statement, he shared two concerns about the upcoming National Dialogue. First, any agreement reached in the National Dialogue is not constitutionally binding. Souaid worries that for some of the most contentious issues that will likely be moved to the dialogue process, there is no guarantee of enforcement of any agreement. Second, he highlighted that if the dialogue process does not adopt time limits and timelines, debate could extend indefinitely. Souaid questioned how effective the dialogue could be if it did not circumvent these two "dangers."

#### US-IRAN RELATIONSHIP OF INTEREST

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18. (C) Souaid commented that March 14 is following with interest the US-Iranian relationship. A/DCM informed Souaid that although the US sent a senior representative to the P5 1 talks with Iran in Geneva, US policy on Iran's nuclear program and engagement with Iran had not changed.

#### COMMENT

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19. (C) Souaid painted a rosy picture that March 14 is united and working in an organized fashion. We have not seen

evidence of it. Earlier this year, the March 14 coalition showed signs of uniting on an effective, unified communications strategy to relay its message to Lebanese voters. That has not been as evident since the May violence. Our own regular contacts with March 14 leaders make us doubt Souaid's claim that the March 14 leadership has an agreed position on electoral reform. End comment.  
GRANT